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Cigars - That's My Business

Earl J. Brown

Havatampa Cigar Co.

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My entire business life which began in the summer of 1937 was spent with Havatampa Cigar Company.

This was when the first questions relating to the Tampa Cigar Industry began to arouse my curiosity. At that time my questions were almost exclusively related to the names "Havatampa Cigar Company", "HAVATAMPA cigars", "HAV-A-TAMPA CIGARS", and "TAMPA NUGGET cigars".

Questions like - Who started the names? Why were the names different? Who were the various owners of the business over the years? What did the labels on the boxes look like? A picture of a man on the HAVATAMPA label rather than that of a beautiful woman? I couldn't believe the
CIGARS

I operate and supply SEVENTEEN RETAIL CIGAR STANDS in this City. I am the largest Retail Cigar Dealer in the Southern States. I handle over two million (2,000,000) Cigars annually.

I have connection with every Manufacturer in the City.

THE BRANDS I CARRY IN STOCK

Tampa Custom House
M. Stachelberger & Co.
F. Lozano Son & Co.
Charles The Great
La Taco
S. R. Morey & Co.
Optimo
Triumfa Nacional!
Cuesta, Rey & Co.
El Principe de Gales

Fama Nacional
Tampa Royals
F. R. B.
Embocados
El Ovando

THAT’S MY BUSINESS

and

A Full Line of Factory Smokers

Tampa manufactured 220,430,000 Cigars to September 1, 1906.
Tampa Cigar Manufacturers received $15,000,000,
Wages paid Laborers in the manufacture of Cigars, $7,000,000.
Tampa manufactures more Clear Havana Cigars than any other city in the world.
Wages paid outside Cigar industry, $7,250,000
United States Government Revenue, $2,368,312.
Bank Deposits, $4,617,896.
Bank Clearings, $55,000,000.
New Building Operations, $1,070,000.
Government Expenditures (Fortifications), $23,000,000.
Government Expenditures (Deep Water), $650,000.
Railroad Traffic (Tons), 396,874.
Commerce by Ocean and Bay, $1,173,686.
Population, 45,000.

Consequently, if it’s CIGARS you want, see me—THAT’S MY BUSINESS.

...ELI WITT...

505 FRANKLIN STREET, TAMPA, FLORIDA
answer to that question but right there before my eyes was the proof. Yes, a picture of a man on the first HAVATAMPA label!

When I found the answers to these questions I was prompted to record them in printed form and have thus produced A History of the Name HAV-A-TAMPA.

There are many stories, articles, pamphlets and books written about the early days of the cigar industry in Tampa, but none make note of the importance of Havatampa and Eli Witt to the industry.

There are likewise many questions about the industry. Questions such as who did manufacture the first cigars in Tampa, and when were they manufactured? There is also the question of where was the first building in which cigars made? I do not profess to be able to prove the answers that
might be given to these questions. I do know however that neither Havatampa no Eli Witt figured into the cigar picture until shortly after 1900.

An interesting photograph that I have seen on display at some shows of cigar memorabilia, and in some printed matter and which was made into a mural, is thought by some observers to have been made in Ybor City's oldest cigar factory. I am fairly familiar with that building but could not picture in my mind where in that building the picture could have been made. Not long ago I found the answer when I ran across the same picture in an old sales pamphlet of another manufacturer (at least 30 years old) that I had in my collection. Things of this nature prompt me to seek the facts and at the same time secure the proof if possible.

In the early part of the 1900s there were more than 150 cigar factories in Tampa. About 50 of them were classified as major businesses, the others being smaller ones. Regardless of the size of a cigar factory each one has to acquire the same permits from, in those days, the U S Internal Revenue Collector's Office whether there was only one employee or 100. The city's production in the year 1901 was 147,000,000 cigars and was the largest single years out put to that date. Within just a few years the production had doubled. Havatampa was not a prominent figure in the industry at that time as it was not registered until 1902. It was not until 1917 that the Havatampa business began to grow.
There is another story related to the name Havatampa, one that is a most integral part. That is the story of Mr. Eli Witt, but it is a volume in itself and will only be touched on lightly in *A History of the Name HA V-A-TAMPA* because of the fact that the "History" is written in the form of a chronology.

However, it would be in order to tell you that in 1904 this super salesman bought a cigar store named "The Hole-In-The-Wall" located at 505 Franklin Street in downtown Tampa. This was the beginning of Eli Witt's activity in the cigar business. He soon adopted the slogan, "CIGARS-THAT'S MY BUSINESS". In just a year or two he had opened a dozen or so cigar stores located at strategic points in Tampa and had also begun a wholesale cigar and tobacco business supplying other cigar stores in the city.

In many old photographs of downtown Tampa a very close scrutiny will uncover signs hanging from the buildings over the sidewalks with just three letters "ELI". Eli Witt distributed all of the leading brands of cigars manufactured in Tampa as well as brands manufactured in other cities and was very successful in developing sales of these brands. One very serious problem arose out of this success. It seemed that as soon as he had worked a brand of cigars up to where it was in demand, the manufacturer began selling direct to the retailers or to other wholesale firms in the area. This is when Mr. Eli realized that he needed a cigar brand of his own that he could control. He reached this goal in 1918 when he arranged to purchase the Havatampa Cigar Company along with financial help of two of his associates, W. L. Van Dyke who was employed by him in 1907, and D. H. Woodbery whom he had employed in 1910, along with some relatives of these two.

By the mid twenties Havatampa had become one of Tampa’s largest cigar manufacturers and for several decades manufactured half of the cigars manufactured in the city. The company progressed to the point that it was the sixth largest cigar manufacturer in the United States. The Eli Witt wholesale organization became the largest of its type in the whole nation and sold more Tampa made cigars than any other single company. It has been said that Eli Witt put the name Tampa on the map. Practically every cigar his company produced had "Tampa" in its name, on every cigar band, on every cigar box, and on every piece of advertising. With something like nine or ten billion cigars manufactured by Havatampa over the years under the names of HAV-A-TAMPA, TAMPA NUGGET, TAMPA STRAIGHTS, TAMPA CUSTOM HOUSE, TAMPA SEAL, TAMPA TIMES, TAMPA SUN CURED, MISS TAMPA, GREATER TAMPA, TAMPA CLUB SMOKER and possibly others, it is understandable why the statement was made. Eli Witt was the originator of the slogan, "THE FINEST CIGARS IN THE WORLD ARE MADE IN TAMPA" which slogan he had typed on the bottom of his letters.

Most of the questions that I have asked about Havatampa have been answered. Through my association with many of the old timers of Havatampa Cigar Company and through research I have uncovered the actual facts about the various forms of the name HAVATAMPA and TAMPA NUGGET.
CENTRAL CIGAR AND TOBACCO CO., ORLANDO – EARLY 1920s

-- From The HAVATAMPA – ELI WITT Collection By EARL BROWN

c1930

- From The HAVATAMPA – ELI WITT Collection by EARL BROWN
As previously mentioned these facts are published in a 34-page chronology of *A History of the Name HA V-A-TAMPA* along with pictures of documents to prove the facts. Many of these pages are in color and inside the front cover of the booklet, in limited number of copies, are two real antique HAV-A-TAMPA cigar box labels. One is an "end label" which was placed on the outside ends of boxes of 50 cigars and the other is an "inside label" designed for upright boxes of 25 cigars. Copies of this chronology may soon be found in some of Tampa's leading book stores and at several shops in Ybor Square. When you visit the State Cigar Museum at 1818 Ninth Ave. in Ybor City you may also obtain a copy there. They may also be ordered direct by writing to *A History of the Name HA V-A-TAMPA, P. O. Box 2886, Tampa, FL 33601.* (None of the photographs accompanying this article appear in the chronology but other photographs and some of the facts mentioned do appear therein.)